

# Montana's Circle of American Masters

## **Inspired by Our Lands...made by Our Hands**

Object: "Morning Star" bowl | Size: 10 1/2" in diameter, 4" deep | Materials: Wood (maple, wenge, pernumbuco, cherry, black walnut, Ceylon satinwood, purple heart and padauk)

### **Artist Background: Richard Charlson, Wood Artist | Medium: Wood**

Rich Charlson lives in an area of Montana known as the Golden Triangle. He was born and raised in Great Falls, received a degree from Montana State University and returned to the family farm after graduation. He is a fourth generation dry-land farmer following in the footsteps of his great-grandfather and grandfather who homesteaded near Carter.

In 1985, hail destroyed the family's crop. Since Rich and his wife, Vivian, both worked on the farm, there was no second income. Seeking another way to support their two small daughters, Rich pulled out a router that had been a Christmas present several years before and began to router redwood house signs. He and Vivian showed their work at craft shows on weekends, took orders, and then spent the weekdays making more signs.

A few years later, Rich bought a wood lathe so he could play with the scraps of wood left over from cutting the signs. He had never tried wood turning, but he thought it looked like fun and decided to make bowls. His first tries were pretty crude, but he found that he loved working on the lathe. As his skills at bowl-making improved, people began to buy them.

Rich began experimenting with different woods, gluing them into patterns before turning them and adding a whole new dimension of creativity to the process. Turning the wood became only a small part of the process. Creating the designs and choosing the woods for the color pattern became a passion, occupying his thoughts. He doesn't use a computer or paper to record his ideas, but even while he is driving the tractor or combine, his mind is busily creating new designs for his one-of-a-kind pieces. Then in October, when the harvest is in, he goes back into his woodshop to recreate the pictures in his mind. These bowls now sell for thousands of dollars.

At first glance, his designs look like woven baskets. Closer inspection reveals thousands of small pieces of wood arranged in many different patterns. None of the wood is dyed or painted – either before or after the bowl is turned on the lathe. Every year he tries to make more intricate bowls than the year before and admits that he is trying to create "the perfect bowl."

Rich's work has appeared in museums and art shows across the state, and he regularly donates to charities and fund-raisers. He helps high school students in their woodworking classes, has been a woodworking leader for 4-H, and is a long-time supporter of Hands of Harvest. He has been featured in an educational video produced by MSU-Great Falls and in national publications, including Crafts Report magazine.



Great Falls Tribune photo/Rion Sanders

**Lesson Plan: Montana Standards for Arts: 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6**

|<<http://www.opi.mt.gov/Accred/cstandards.html>>

**Indian Education Essential Understandings: 2, 3, 4** can be included by studying designs of Southwest American Indians <<http://www.opi.mt.gov/indianed2/IEFAGuidance.html>>

**Goals and objectives:**

The learner will gain an understanding of the designs and patterns used by ancient cultures through research on the web and in books. Students will create a design of their own based on these ancient patterns. Students will gain an understanding of the process of laminating wood to create a design by making a trivet or coaster.

Richard Charlson is intrigued with the geometric designs of the ancient Indian cultures of the Southwest and how variations of the designs can be seen in other cultures such as the ancient Egyptians. He uses parts of these designs to create his own new designs for his bowls. After creating the design and finishing a bowl, he takes time to look at it and decide what he likes about it or what he might change for the next bowl design. To create the designs in his bowls he uses hundreds of small pieces of naturally colored wood.

**Warm-up/pre-project preparation:**

- Look at ancient geometric designs from Southwest American Indian pottery: University of Massachusetts Amherst Department of Art and Art History  
<<http://www.umass.edu/arthist/pots/main.html>> and American Indian baskets: Smithsonian National Museum of the American Indian  
<[http://www.nmai.si.edu/exhibitions/baskets/subpage.cfm?subpage=tech\\_tech](http://www.nmai.si.edu/exhibitions/baskets/subpage.cfm?subpage=tech_tech)> (*Look at other links in this section also*)
- Look at ancient geometric designs from Egypt: Southern Polytechnic State University  
<<http://www.spsu.edu/math/tile/grammar/egypt.htm>> or other ancient cultures such as Greek pottery: University of South Florida  
<<http://luna.cas.usf.edu/~demilio/2211unit1/pottery.htm>>
- Find locations of these cultures on maps.
- Look for similarities in designs between cultures.
- Have students draw their own design on paper.

**Materials needed:**

- Small pieces of wood in assorted shapes (Balsa wood is easily cut or art supply catalogs like Dick Blick carry pre-cut shapes)
- Wood squares, 4 x 4 inches, to use as backing to glue shapes onto (any thin wood such as fiberboard or balsa wood can be used, or heavy mat board could also be used)
- Wood glue, sandpaper
- Stain or paint and water-based varnish

**Project:****After drawing their own design on paper, have students:**

1. Sort through wood shapes to find shapes that will work with their pattern. If thin balsa wood is used, they can cut the shapes using sharp scissors; or a hobby knife can be used with supervision.
2. Paint or stain pieces before assembly if some need to be different colors for their design.
3. Following their own design, carefully place the small balsa pieces onto their 4x4 backing.
4. Glue the design in place onto the 4x4 backing using wood glue.
5. After the glue has completely dried, sand off the excess glue. The entire surface can be lightly sanded to make it smooth, or if mat board is used as a backing, the wood pieces should be lightly sanded across the top only.
6. Varnish the entire piece, if desired, in a well-ventillated area. If using mat board, lightly varnish the wood pieces only.

**Evaluation:**

- Students stayed on task working to finish piece.
- Students created their own original art work.
- Students re-created their original drawn design as closely as possible.
- Students sanded off excess glue and applied an appropriate finish.

**Cross curriculum:**

- Art: Consider other types of art that use geometric patterns, such as quilts. Compare and contrast the types of patterns different art forms use. Great Lakes Quilt Center
- <<http://museum.cl.msu.edu/glqc/>> (Click on the “Collections” button.)
- Math: Look at quilt patterns and how the shapes apply to geometry.
- History: Study the history of ancient cultures.
- Indian Education for All: Study the Indian cultures of the Southwest.

**Variations:**

Use small pieces of paper in same process then run through a laminator or press between two layers of clear contact paper to create coasters.

**Vocabulary:**

**Ancient** – belonging to the distant past, perhaps several thousand years ago, something that is very old

**Cultures** – a group of people who have the same shared beliefs, social behavior, and customs

**Design** – a plan of something, a drawing of something, or a repeated pattern of decoration

**Pattern** – a regular or repeating shape, form, order or color to make a decorative design

**Lathe** – a machine used for working with wood. The machine holds the wood and rotates it as the woodworker presses cutting tools into the wood, carving away parts of the wood to create things like bowls, candle holders, vases, etc.

**Varnish** – a liquid made of oil that is applied to the wood surface to make a protective coating

**Laminate** – to bond thin layers of wood together to create one thicker and stronger piece of wood

**Think About it!**

**Take a good look at the picture of Richard Charlson’s bowl:**

- Does it look like any bowl you have ever seen before?
- What is different?
- How long do you think it would take to make a bowl like his?
- What do you like about his work?
- Can you see any patterns that look familiar?
- Do they remind you of anything else?

**Lesson plan:**

Cheryl Bannes, artist-in-residence, Lewistown, Montana

**Direct questions to:**

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**Further resources at:** [www.art.mt.gov](http://www.art.mt.gov)

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